

Dust In The Wind

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Mother Nature can be ruthless, particularly in the desert. Even our Army, the most mobile and powerful in the world, must bend to her power, especially during sandstorms. Sandstorms have a negative impact on personnel and equipment readiness, and any type of operation during such conditions is dangerous. You can protect yourself and get the mission done, however, even during the worst of conditions.

Sandstorms occur frequently on the Arabian Peninsula and are most common in April. These storms are created by strong, dry winds that blow close to the desert's surface. The heat of the desert terrain causes the winds to become stronger and hotter. Throw in a cold front and tornado-like forces suddenly appear, complete with howling winds and swirling sand.

A sandstorm's leading edge creates a wall of dust that reduces visibility to near zero. Driving in Iraq is already dangerous even in the best of conditions. The probability of an accident increases when you factor in a sandstorm and near-zero visibility.

Operating vehicles during a sandstorm is extremely difficult, so the optimum choice is to stay put on your base or in a safe place. However, if the mission must go on, drive slowly. Wear goggles with the clear or yellow-tinted lens insert to protect your eyes. If you don't have goggles, wear any type of eye protection that might be available.

Thermal imaging devices provide vehicle and tank drivers better visibility during sandstorms. An Army News Service story explained the benefits of these devices to Soldiers at the beginning of the Iraq conflict. "During the infamous Iraqi sandstorms ... our Army had very limited visibility," the story read. "Soldiers in Iraq discovered they still had good visibility with their individual and crew-served thermal weapons sights, even when the sandstorms obscured nearly every other optical sensor."

Communication during sandstorms is problematic. Sometimes the wind and blasting noises make communication between crewmembers and other Soldiers nearly impossible. Even so, drivers, co-drivers and vehicle commanders must communicate with one another. Situational and environmental awareness is vital to Soldier safety during sandstorms, especially in moving vehicles. Drivers and vehicle commanders must use the scanning method while driving during these storms.

Sandstorms also present physical dangers to Soldiers. Blowing sand can make breathing difficult, and fine sand particles cause a hacking cough. Place a T-shirt or cloth over your nose and mouth to help you breathe and protect your airway. Close all vehicle vents and place sand bags or other material over any openings. Both these measures are important because sand and dust within the Persian Gulf region can carry infectious diseases, so protect your airway as much as possible.

Sandstorms aren't a force to be taken lightly. Be prepared and know the proper techniques to prevent an accident and protect yourself when sandstorms strike.



---FYI Keep the following tips in mind when Mother Nature decides to surprise you with a sandstorm during your desert deployment:

- Always wear protective eyewear.
- Protect your airway by placing a cloth over your nose and mouth.
- Close vehicle vents and cover all openings.
- Drive slowly.
- Communicate with all crewmembers.
- Know your route and maintain situational awareness.
- Drive with lights on to help others see your vehicle.
- If your vehicle breaks down, use it for cover from the elements. Don't leave the vehicle to search for help; the storm will end eventually.
- Be prepared for the unexpected. Always carry a kit bag, rucksack, basic issue items, batteries and food and water in your vehicle in case you break down or have to pull over.